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SETH IN THE MAGICAL TEXTS

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Seth in the Magical Texts

The scope of this paper is to clear up two misconceptions about the identity of Seth in the magical texts. Although it may appear to be rather modest, the scope is an entirely appreciable one, for the name of Seth is prevalent in magical literature.

I

At the Yale Conference on Gnosticism (1978), B.A. Pearson read a paper entitled, "Seth in Gnostic Literature". Pearson showed that the Gnostic figure of Seth derives from Jewish tradition. In an excursus at the end of the paper named "Egyptian Influences?", the author laid down that the Egyptian god Seth is never identified with Seth, the son of Adam.¹

In the discussion following Pearson's paper, however, C. Colpe asserted (p. 510), "In a single magical papyrus from Egypt a mistaken identification has been made between Egyptian Seth and Jewish Seth (cf. W. Fauth, *OrChr* 57 [1973] 91-94)." Now Fauth asserts that on account of the similarity of the names of the Egyptian god and "the pneumatic Seth", the latter "on Egyptian soil was now and then secondarily confused and welded with the indigenous god of magic."² Here Fauth refers to C.J. Bleeker's paper at the Messina Conference on Gnosticism (1966). Fauth goes on to cite "the Sethian Gospel of the Egyptians" as evidence for such a confusion and welding, referring to an article by A. Böhlig. We may dispose of the latter's theory right away. Pearson has shown conclusively that the *Gospel of the Egyptians* from Nag Hammadi does not try to "rehabilitate the Egyptian god by interpreting him in terms of Seth, the son of Adam."³ In the *Gospel of the Egyptians* as well as other Gnostic documents, the figure of Seth is the Jewish Seth only.

We move on to Bleeker's article. Here we find only the brief statement, "In him [i.e., Seth], the Egyptian god and the noble son of Adam and Eve are fused."⁴ Bleeker does not offer a shred of evidence for his assertion, but simply refers to J. Doresse, *The Secret Books of the Egyptian Gnostics* (New York 1960, 1970 [Paris 1958]). What does the latter say?

Doresse's argument is complex, even confused. He argues that in Gnosticism "the Egyptian myths had undergone the same inversion as had the traditional values of *Genesis*; the originally "good" god Osiris, of whom Seth was the enemy, became identified with *Sacla-Ialdabaoth* the wicked demiurge" (p. 104, n. 93). By implication Doresse appears to say that the Egyptian Seth now was seen as a positive figure. The author indeed wonders "whether,

¹ *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, 2 vols., ed. B. Layton, Studies in the History of Religion 41 (Leiden 1980/81) 2.500.

² W. Fauth, "Seth-Typhon, Onoel und der eselköpfige Gott", *Oriens Christianus* 57 (1973) 92.

³ B.A. Pearson, "Egyptian Seth and Gnostic Seth", *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers* 22 (Missoula 1977) 33. Cf. Pearson, "Seth", 501.

⁴ "The Egyptian Background of Gnosticism" in *Le Origini dello Gnosticismo*, ed. U. Bianchi, Studies in the History of Religion 12 (Leiden 1967) 236.

perchance, some of these [Gnostic] myths did not bring him into such contact with his homonym, Seth the son of Adam, as to create some confusion between them."⁵ Thinking that such a "confusion" was "not impossible", Doresse goes on to assert that there can be found "some curious traces of a cult of this Seth-Typhon presiding over Judeo-Gnostic rituals in which Adam plays the leading part." He then says, "That this cult came to be actually codified is attested by the existence of Egyptian figurines of the god Seth... ." After having given a short description of these figurines, Doresse concludes, "There is no doubt about the identification of the god worshipped in this guise, as one of the great figures of Gnosticism: the pedestal is engraved with the name Aberamenthō, which denoted Jesus" (p. 105). Finally, in order "to show what relations already existed between Gnosticism and the more confused magical literature in which this fantastic demon appears", Doresse refers to an incantation known as the *Stele of Jeou the Painter*, where the headless god, Akephalos, is said to be Osiris-Onnophris, i.e., "Osiris the Beautiful Being". Among his names, Doresse counts, "Arbatiaō, Seth, Iaō, Sabaōth and Abrasax" (p. 105).

Let us consider Doresse's evidence and arguments. To begin with, it must be pointed out that there is no evidence to the effect that the Egyptian god Seth was seen as a positive figure in Gnosticism. Fauth has shown that the ass-headed Seth-Typhon is always a negative archon in the Gnostic texts ("Seth-Typhon" [above, n. 2] 106-120). Moreover, as has been stated above, Seth-Typhon is never welded with Seth, the son of Adam, in Gnostic literature.

Can there be found "traces of a cult of Seth-Typhon presiding over Judeo-Gnostic rituals in which Adam plays the leading part"? If the answer proves to be affirmatory, we should inquire whether the evidence for this "cult" shows a welding of Egyptian Seth and Jewish Seth. Doresse refers to a prayer handed down in two recensions in the Greek magical papyri (*PGM* I.195-222; IV.1167-1226). In these prayers, the celebrant identifies himself with Adam, the first man, and prays to be restored to the original state from which he has fallen. E. Peterson, to whom we are indebted for a penetrating analysis of the two prayers, connected the strange name of one of the prayers, ῥυστική (I.196), with the fifth hour of the day: in *PGM* IV.9, the time of the ῥυστική is the fifth hour. According to IV.174ff., this is the hour when the sun is in zenith and the magician turns to his god Typhon.⁶

The puzzling portrayal of Seth-Typhon as a sun god in Greco-Roman times remains to be fully accounted for,⁷ but that religio-historical problem lies outside the scope of this paper.

⁵ *Secret Books* 104f. Already R. Wünsch, *Sethianische Verfluchungstafeln aus Rom* (Leipzig 1898) 108-113, 116, *et passim*, argued for an amalgamation of Seth-Typhon and Seth-Christ. He was effectively refuted by K. Preisendanz, *Akephalos. Der kopflose Gott*, Beiheft zum "Alten Orient" 8 (Leipzig 1926) 23-37. Still, the view of Wünsch was perpetuated; see below, n. 21, and Pearson, "Egyptian Seth" (above n. 3), 36, nn. 1 and 2.

⁶ See Peterson, "Die Befreiung Adams aus der 'Ανάγκη" in his *Frühkirche, Judentum und Gnosis* (Rome, Freiburg, Vienna 1959) 108. Peterson discarded Preisendanz' tentative suggestion that ῥυστική indicated the Sunday. M.W. Meyer in *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation*, ed. H.D. Betz (Chicago and London 1986) 36, n. 3, simply cites Preisendanz without showing knowledge of Peterson's article; cf. R. Kotanski, "Incantations and Prayers for Salvation on Inscribed Amulets" in *Magika Hiera*, ed. C.A. Faraone and D. Obink (New York-Oxford 1991) 137, n. 110.

⁷ Although Seth in ancient Egypt could be reconciled with Horus and seen as the defender of the solar bark, his cult seems to have disappeared after the Assyrian period and the god himself began to be turned into a demon; see H. Te Velde, *Seth, God of Confusion*, *Probleme der Ägyptologie* 6 (Leiden 1967) 139-151.

Two points only need to be made in this connection. Firstly, Typhon in the spell contained in *PGM* IV.154-285 is not equated with Seth, Adam's son; in fact, the name of Seth does not occur in the spell. Secondly, the two prayers "in which Adam plays the leading part" mention neither Egyptian Seth nor Jewish Seth.⁸

The "existence of Egyptian figurines of the god Seth" carrying the name of Aberamenthō, a name which also is given to Jesus in one Gnostic work, does not pertain to the Jewish figure of Seth. It will be dealt with in the second part of the paper. The so-called *Stele of Jeou the Hieroglyphist*,⁹ however, must be discussed in the present part. The papyrus certainly shows Jewish influence. In the Osiris aretology at the beginning, the author claims to be Moses, and the true name of the headless god, Osoronphris, "Osiris the Beautiful Being" (Ὀσορονῶφρις), is given as Ἰάβας (i.e. Jahwe [also below]) and is said to have been "transmitted to the prophets of Israel" (*PGM* V.108ff.). K. Preisendanz originally argued that the text did not contain the name of Seth. He read, "Arbathiaō, Reibetathelebersēth, arablatha...",¹⁰ or, in *PGM* V.118f., Αρβ[α]θιαω ρειβετ.αθελεβερχηθ.α[ρα] βλαθα. The latter version was accepted in *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation* edited by H.D. Betz. Thus, the last syllable in the second or third word, *seth*, is not separated from the preceding letters. But in the index of the 3rd volume, the printing plates of which were destroyed during World War II, Preisendanz changed this to αρβ[α]θιαω 'Ρε ιβετ αθελεβερ Cήθ αρ[α]βλαθα.¹¹ Even if this papyrus regards Seth, along with the "Tetrad of the Four Letters" (Jahwe) and "Eastern Rhe", as one of the names of Osiris, it contains no evidence whatsoever for a welding of Egyptian Seth and Jewish Seth.

We can now recapitulate. Colpe, asserting that there was an Egyptian magical papyrus which showed an amalgamation of Egyptian Seth and Jewish Seth, referred to Fauth. Asserting that such a welding was made on Egyptian soil, Fauth simply relied on Bleeker and Böhlig. The latter has been proven wrong that the *Gospel of the Egyptians* shows an amalgamation of Egyptian Seth and Jewish Seth. Bleeker only referred to Doresse in substantiation of his statement that such an identification could be found. There is no evidence for Doresse's theory that the Gnostics took Seth-Typhon to be a beneficial deity and merged him with Jewish Seth. Furthermore, when Seth-Typhon appears as the sun god in the magical papyri, there is no trace of a welding with the Jewish figure of Seth.

II

In his article, "Egyptian Seth and Gnostic Seth" (above, n. 3), B.A. Pearson says that, to his knowledge, the Jewish figure of Seth does not occur in the Greek magical papyri (p. 28). He goes on, "There is one possible occurrence in a Coptic curse-manuscript now in Berlin, where the only-begotten Son of God is called 'Seth, Seth, the living Christ' (col. i.9), but

⁸ The spell in *PGM* IV.1167-1226 is addressed to Helios, but the text does not employ the term ῥυττική.

⁹ See now the reading text and discussion in R. Merkelbach and M. Totti, *Abrasax* II, Abh. Rhein.-Westf. Ak., Sonderreihe Pap. Coloniensia XVII.2 (Opladen 1991) 153-174.

¹⁰ *Akephalos* (above, n. 5) 44. Doresse apparently followed the reading proposed by A. Delatte, "Etudes sur la magie grecque, V. ΑΚΕΦΑΛΟC ΘΕΟC", *Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique* 38 (1914) 196, line 12.

¹¹ Reg. VI p. 216 and 229 (Ῥε ιβετ, "Eastern Rhe" [K. Schmidt]); Reg. XII p. 244 and 247; cf. the preface to the 3rd volume in A. Henrichs' edition of 1974, p. XVI; see also Delatte (above, n. 10). For Rhe, the sun god, and Seth, see *Abrasax* II (above, n. 9) p. 25 (on line 514).

later, in a series of magic names, 'Iao Iao Seth Seth' (ii.1) may reflect the identification, Iao = Seth-Typhon."¹²

Whereas Pearson is somewhat cautious, W. Vycichl is not. In the article, "Magic", in the recently published *Coptic Encyclopedia*, the latter says, "... there can be no doubt that the Egyptian god is meant."¹³ Since Vycichl does not support his statement in any way whatsoever (he does not even refer to Pearson in his bibliography), we must turn back to Pearson. His argument is as follows. Since Iaō can be identified with Seth-Typhon in the Greek magical texts, the phrase, "Seth Seth the Living Christ", as well as, "Iaō Iaō Seth Seth", within one and the same magical text may be taken to mean that Seth in the former as well as the latter phrase indicates the Egyptian deity.

It is true that the name of Iao can be counted as one of the titles of Seth-Typhon: Pearson sees evidence for this in four texts from the Greek magical papyri.¹⁴ Already A. Procopé-Walter, in an article which Pearson does not appear to know, argued that three of these texts show only a collocation of Iao-names and Seth-names, and that no explicit identification of Iaō and Seth-Typhon is implied.¹⁵ On the other hand, Procopé-Walter knew that Iaō and Seth-Typhon could be identified as well as associated: the focal point of his article is Papyrus Osloensis I (*PGM XXXVI*), where two Iaō-pictures are identified as representations of Seth-Typhon.¹⁶ The question for us, however, is whether the Coptic magical text cited above witnesses to a welding of Seth-Typhon and *Christ*.

Iaō, a Greek form of the name of the Biblical God, Yahweh (above, Arbathiaō), is associated and even equated with many deities in the magical texts. The conjuration in *PGM IV.3019-3024* begins, "I conjure you by the god of the Hebrews, Jesus, Iaba Iaē..." Just before the conjuration, we are informed that the phylactery should include, inter alia, the names, Iaēo, Iaō, Iaēō. It is clear that Jesus is here identified with the Jewish God, whose proper name is rendered by various Greek forms.¹⁷ From the Coptic Gnostic texts, we also know that Seth, Adam's son, and Christ could be identified.¹⁸ The same identification appears to be

¹² For a translation of the full text, which is still unpublished, see A.M. Kropp, *Ausgewählte Koptische Zaubertexte*, 3 vols. (Bruxelles 1930/31) 2.238-239.

¹³ W. Vycichl, *The Coptic Encyclopedia*, 6 vols., ed. A.S. Atiya (New York 1991) 6.1503.

¹⁴ I.e., *PGM III.1-124*; *IV.179-181*, 204, 208; *IV.1331-1389*; *IV.3255-3274*. While IAΩ stood for the shorter form of the Tetragrammaton (see e.g. D.G. Martinez, in his commentary on *P. Mich. XVI.757 [A Greek Love Charm from Egypt, American Studies in Papyrology 30 (Atlanta, Georgia, 1991)] 79f.*), it was easily connected with IΩ, the sound of a braying ass, thus signifying Seth; see, for example, R. Merkelbach, *Abrasax III*, Abh. Rhein.-Westf. Ak., Pap. Coloniensia XVII.3 (Opladen 1992) 44, 19f., 214 (gg). For a picture of Seth as ass, see, e.g., *Suppl. Mag. II.69*.

¹⁵ See Procopé-Walter, "Iao und Set", *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft* 30 (1933) 64-65. He does not discuss *PGM IV.1331-1389*.

¹⁶ See "Iao und Seth" 34-48. Pearson did not note this text.

¹⁷ There is no need to regard the identification of Jesus as "the god of the Hebrews" as due to a later hand. In certain quarters, Jesus was regarded as the Biblical *Mal'ak Yahweh*, the Yahweh Angel, who is often indistinguishable from God himself. Already in Jude 5, Jesus is seen as the Angel of Yahweh who led the People out of Egypt; see J. Fossum, "Kyrios Jesus as the Angel of the Lord in Jude 5-7", *New Testament Studies* 33 (1987) 226-243. This is one of the prominent works of the deity invoked in the spell in *PGM IV.3007-3086*; see lines 3034-3036 and 3054-3055.

¹⁸ See Pearson, "Egyptian Seth" (above, n. 3) 30, 31, 33; "Seth" (above, n. 1) 76-79.

indicated by the phrase, "Seth Seth the Living Christ", in our Coptic magical text. The later phrase, "Iaō Iaō Seth Seth", would appear to suggest an identification of Iao and Seth-Christ.¹⁹ That Iao and Christ were identified in the Coptic magical papyri is shown clearly by another spell, where we read, "Iaō Iaō the Christ Pantokratōr" (XLIII.83).²⁰ The Egyptian god Seth, however, cannot be recognized in the Coptic magical papyri (see Kropp, *Zaubertexte* 3.9-10).

Pearson was not aware of other occurrences of the name of Seth in the Coptic texts, but the name does occur. Already W.H. Worrell published a transcription and translation of one of the texts in the Coptic "Wizard's Hoard", now found at the University of Michigan.²¹ Here the magician identifies himself with "Seth the son of Adam, the first revelation of the unformed hands..." (1.15-2.2). He is the one "to whom have been revealed the virtues, and the mysteries, and its manipulations (i.e., the rituals which attend the prayer), and the power of these arts" (4.2-5).

P. Mirecki, who is preparing a comprehensive critical edition of the "Wizard's Hoard", correctly has pointed out that the idea of Seth as a recipient of divine mysteries derives from Gnostic and—ultimately—Jewish sources.²² He also states that this theme appears to be otherwise unknown in the magical texts.²³ This appears to be right, but we should note that it is found in a non-magical and non-Gnostic text known as the *Martyrdom of Chamoul*: here Seth is said to be the one "to whom God showed the mysteries of life."²⁴ Thus, in different branches of Coptic Christianity, the Jewish figure of Seth was seen as a recipient of divine mysteries. In this capacity, however, he was never equated with the Egyptian god Seth-Typhon.

¹⁹ Between these two phrases, we find another Iao formula which begins, "The Great Power (*Dynamis*) of heaven, Iao Iao Machael" (col. i, 15-16). The name, Machael, apparently is to be understood as Michael. In an alleged quotation from the *Gospel according to the Hebrews* preserved in a Coptic translation of a homily attributed to Cyril of Jerusalem, the angel Michael is called a "Great Power (*Dynamis*) in heaven" (E.A. Wallis Budge, *Miscellaneous Coptic Texts*, 2 vols., Coptic Texts V [London 1915, reprinted New York 1977] 1.60). For the assimilation of Christ to Michael in early Christianity, see J. Daniélou, *The Theology of Jewish Christianity*, The Development of Christian Doctrine Before the Council of Nicaea I; trans. J.A. Baker (London 1964) 121-127 (*Théologie du Judéo-Christianisme*, Histoire des doctrines chrétiennes avant Nicée, I, Bibliothèque de Théologie [Tournai 1958] 171-177).

²⁰ See Kropp, *Zaubertexte* 1.25. F.J. Dölger, *IXΘYC*, 5 vols. (Münster 1928-43) 1.267-268, discusses a couple of gems where the name of Iao as well as the name of Ichthys denotes the Good Shepherd surrounded by the twelve Apostles. Cf. also his discussion on p. 270-272.

²¹ See Worrell, "A Coptic Wizard's Hoard", *American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* 46 (1930) 239-262. Standing in the tradition inaugurated by Wunsch (see n. 5), Worrell says that the god is "Set-Typhon-Seth—the good, the evil, the powerful god, the storm demon, the Hebrew patriarch, the Gnostic Christ, the ass-headed one on the crucifix" (255). As for the theory that the famous Palatine graffito is a Christian Gnostic work showing an identification of Christ and the Egyptian Seth, see already the refutation in Procopé-Walter, "Iao und Set" (above n. 15) 50-51.

²² See Mirecki, "The Coptic 'Wizard's Hoard'", to be published in the *Proceedings of the Conference on Magic in the Ancient World*, University of Kansas, August 1992 (n. 69 in the typescript put at our disposal).

²³ Mirecki points out (n. 57 in the typescript at our disposal) that in a Coptic magical text "Biblical Seth" occurs in a list of names including, *inter alia*, Adam, Seth, Noah, Methusala (ⲙⲁⲑⲟⲩⲥⲁⲗⲁ; *Die koptischen Zaubertexte der Sammlung Papyrus Erzherzog Rainer in Wien*, ed. V. Stegemann, Sb. Heid. Ak. d. Wiss., phil.-hist. Kl. 1933/4, 1 [Heidelberg 1934] 70 § XLV [108]). Lists of the Biblical heroes from Adam to Moses play a great role in Jewish Christianity; see C. Gieschen, "The Seven Pillars of the World: Ideal Figures Lists in the True Prophet Christology of the Pseudo-Clementine Literature", *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha*, forthcoming.

²⁴ W.C. Crum, *Catalogue of the Coptic Manuscripts in the British Museum* (London 1905) 147.

We have still to discuss Doresse's reference to the existence of certain Egyptian figurines of Seth as evidence for a welding of Seth-Typhon and Christ. Doresse in actual fact cited only one bronze statue bearing the inscription, Aberamenthō.²⁵ This name also appears as a name of Jesus in a formula-like phrase repeated three times in the untitled treatise (Book IV) at the end of Codex Askewianus, "Jesus who is Aberamenthō" (chs. 136, 139, 141).²⁶

Noting that Aberamenthō is a name of Seth-Typhon in a spell in the Demotic Leiden Papyrus, and that the same spell also calls him by the name of Ereshkigal, the Sumerian goddess of the underworld,²⁷ F.C. Burkitt proposed that Jesus' title, Aberamenthō, identified him as Rhadamanthus, because 'Ραδάμανθος in Aeolic is spelled as βραδάμανθος. "If the medial δ between the two α's was dropped or misread, something very much like Aberamentho is the result" (*Church and Gnosis* [Cambridge 1932] 83). But this explanation is not sustainable. It may be said that "Rhadamanthus in Classical tradition was just and kindly, as is the Aberamentho of Pistis Sophia." However, in later tradition, forthcoming—for instance—in Virgil, Rhadamanthus is a terrifying "judge in the land of fear..., examining, punishing and forcing [people] to confess" (*Aen.* VI.566-67). Moreover, Jesus in the untitled work in the Askew Codex is not a judge in the underworld, but a saviour and a revealer. The judging and punishing functions are ascribed to other beings (ch. 140). One of these beings actually is Typhon. Thus, Seth-Typhon is clearly distinguishable from Jesus in Codex Askewianus. The latter's name, Aberamenthō, therefore cannot identify him as the former.

D.G. Martinez recently attributed Jesus' name, Aberamenthō, to "the syncretism of both Yahweh and Jesus with Typhon-Seth" (*P. Mich.* XVI [above n. 14] 33). He referred to R. W. Daniel (*ZPE* 50 [1983] 151f.) as well as R. Wünsch (p. 46f. [see above, n. 5]), obviously without knowing the refutation of the latter. Daniel does not contribute anything to the discussion. In substantiation of his statement that Egyptian Seth was welded with Yahweh, he merely referred to the article by Procopé-Walter published in 1933 (above, n. 15). Now it cannot be denied that the name of Aberamenthō could be used with reference to Seth-Typhon. One of the Iaō-Seth representations in Pap. Osl. I stands on a base which carries the inscription, Aberamenthō.²⁸ Procopé-Walter pointed out that this title also occurs as a designation of Seth in the Paris magical papyrus (*PGM* IV.3272).²⁹

As a matter of fact, the name of Aberamenthō (including cognates like Ameramenthōouth, Aberannemane Thōouth, and Amekranebecheo Thōouth) occurs frequently in the magical papyri.³⁰ A clear identification with Seth, however, is less common. It should also be noted

²⁵ See G. Roeder, *Ägyptische Bronzefiguren*, Mitteilungen aus der Ägyptischen Sammlung, Staatl. Museen, 6 (Berlin 1956) 65 (§ 99c) and Plate 72g. Roeder thinks that the figurine is rather late and "hardly Egyptian". It is difficult to ascertain whether the head is that of an ass (Seth's animal) or that of a horse.

²⁶ *Pistis Sophia*, ed. C. Schmidt and trans. V. MacDermot, Nag Hammadi Studies 11 (Leiden 1978) 354 (line 8), 360 (line 5), 367 (line 22).

²⁷ *PDM* xiv 686ff. in *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation* (above, n. 6) 232; ~ *PGM* XIV.20ff.

²⁸ See *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation* (above, n. 6) 271. The representation is discussed by Procopé-Walter, "Iao und Set" (above, n. 15) 46-47.

²⁹ See "Iao und Set" (above, n. 6) 48. Doresse did not note the evidence of the magical papyri.

³⁰ M. Tardieu lists 13 cases of Aberamenthō and cognates: "Aberamenthō" in *Studies in Gnosticism and Hellenistic Religions presented to Gilles Quispel on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday*, ed. R. van den Broek and M.J. Vermaseren, Etudes préliminaires aux religions orientales dans l'Empire Romain 91 (Leiden 1981)

³⁵ In the two other places where the phrase, "Jesus who is Aberamenthō", is found, the context provides no clue to the nature of the carrier of the name.